

Possible Connections between Theology and Artistic Beauty – the Case of Caravaggio.

Is it really the case that one could hope to build a theology around artistic beauty when one considers that theology is traditionally seen as being involved with truth? For, surely it is with ultimate *Truth* that the theologian is concerned. Of course, for the romantic imagination of the poet, beauty is truth and truth beauty; however, one can easily think of many beautiful images and conceptions which appear to bear little relation to truth. It is, after all, rather easy to be deceived by fair appearances. Even if one were to hold that Beauty and Truth are *one* in the unity of the transcendentals, in our more mundane encounters, it seems obvious that artistic beauty is no guarantee of truth. The same appears to be the case with goodness; it seems evident that a truly beautiful artifact does not say anything about the moral character of its maker.

Such seemingly obvious claims appear to be illustrated fairly convincingly by the life and works of Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio (1571–1610). With regards to his moral character, his life appears to have been tempestuous, with numerous serious brushes with the law. In short, by the same standards of what must have been a turbulent time, he was considered to be a downright scoundrel. Even in his art, he often scandalized the church authorities by using as models the genuinely poor, humble and sullied: urchins, loafers, prostitutes, and destitute old men and women, with their grubby fingernails and throbbing feet, thinning hair and weathered faces. A number of his works were rejected by those who commissioned them because they were deemed indecorous. About his *Madonna dei parafrenieri*, one cardinal's secretary wrote: "In this painting there are but vulgarity, sacrilege, impiousness and disgust ... One would say it is a work made by a painter that can paint well, but of a dark spirit, and who has been for a lot of time far from God, from His adoration, and from any good thought ...". And his *Death of the Virgin*, commissioned in 1601, was famously rejected by the Carmelites of Santa Maria della Scala in 1606 apparently because he had used a well-known prostitute as his model for the Virgin¹. Nicolas Poussin, who arrived in Rome shortly after Caravaggio's untimely death is said to have observed that 'he came to destroy painting'.

Yet, there is little doubt that his influence was enormous. No sooner was the *Death of the Virgin* taken out of the church that Peter Paul Rubens himself strongly advised the Duke of Mantua to acquire it. And when, in the 1920's, art critic Roberto Longhi brought Caravaggio's name to public attention, he noted that: "Ribera, Vermeer, La Tour and Rembrandt could never have existed without him. And the art of Delacroix, Courbet and Manet would have been utterly different."² The influential American critic Bernard Berenson concurs averring that "with the exception of Michelangelo, no other Italian painter exercised so great an influence."³

¹ This reason was recorded by Caravaggio's contemporary Giulio Mancini.

² Quoted by GILLES LAMBERT, *Caravaggio*, Taschen 2000, 15.

³ Quoted by GILLES LAMBERT, *Caravaggio*, Taschen 2000, 8.

There were also some doubts cast on Caravaggio's orthodoxy. According to John Gash, in the case of the *Death of the Virgin*, the problem for the Carmelites may have been theological rather than aesthetic, in that Caravaggio's version failed to assert properly the doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. Indeed, in that painting, Caravaggio "did not soften the blow. Death has not lost its sting ... nothing in the desolate chamber suggests that anything will happen next. The woman's swollen body is hardly in a condition to be assumed into Heaven".⁴

In short, at first sight, Caravaggio appears to be a paradigmatic example for the claim that great beauty is not necessarily accompanied by moral goodness or even by limpid truth. However, one must also aver that Caravaggio's paintings are couched in the language of theatrical realism; he selected the most dramatic instant for each theme he painted and insisted upon absolute faith to the individual model, depicting the particular experience with utter naturalism. Indeed, the watchword in his paintings appears to have been 'truth'. He was undoubtedly true to his models – warts and all – but he was also true to the subject of his work. In this, he certainly worked according to the spirit of the times. The Council of Trent, whose dictums shaped the counter-reformation, insisted that religious paintings be very clear in their message. Caravaggio's naturalism, which combined minute physical observation with a dramatic, even theatrical approach, perfectly executed this demand with the result that his realism was taken up by many artists:

Never before had an artist presented religious drama as contemporary life... Nor had any earlier painter dared to break so dramatically with long established studio traditions, painting his figures from nature, directly onto the canvas, with complex effects of studio lighting. It was the figures having been painted from life that most fascinated Caravaggio's contemporaries.⁵

On the 4th December 1563, in its twenty-fifth Session, the Council of Trent passed a number of decrees some of which dealt directly with sacred images. The church felt that much religious art in Catholic countries had lost its focus on the religious subject-matter and become too interested in aiming at producing the most imaginative or striking representation. Clarity and directness were sacrificed for brilliance. The Council of Trent decreed – and this was surely familiar to Caravaggio – that art was to be direct and compelling in its narrative presentation, aiming to provide an accurate presentation of the biblical narrative or saint's life – rather than adding incidental and imaginary flourishes – and aspiring to encourage piety:⁶

[B]y means of the histories of the mysteries of our Redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people is instructed, and confirmed in [the habit of] remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith; [and] great profit is derived from all sacred images, not only because the people are thereby admonished of the benefits and gifts bestowed upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful; [in order that] they may

⁴ JOHN T. SPIKE, *Caravaggio*, Abbeville Press 2001, 155.

⁵ HELEN LANGDON, *Caravaggio: a life*, Chatto and Windus 1998.

⁶ See JOHN T. PAOLETTI – GARY M. RADKE, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, Pearson Education Inc. 2005, 514.

give God thanks for those things; may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and ... cultivate piety.⁷

Painted images had, of course, always been used as devotional aids. Baroque paintings, which conveyed the message and spirit of the counter-reformation, represented both a thematic and stylistic renewal. Martyrs began to be featured at the moment of their death. The popularity of penitence and conversion paintings increased tremendously and there was a great revival of interest in 'fallible' saints like Mary Magdalene. These figures were valuable role models precisely because they had sinned, yet repented, and received forgiveness.

This same humanism characterized the treatment of religious subjects in Baroque art. Artists began to focus on dissolving the visual barrier that kept viewers from participating in the religious drama being portrayed. They set their figures at the forefront of their works, and accentuated their already dynamic scenes with heightened effects of light and shade. This, of course, was something that Caravaggio accomplished with remarkable success. His naturalism certainly makes his religious art immediately accessible, and his characters are unambiguous exemplars both for the faithful and for the less than faithful, as is also very evident in the *Death of the Virgin*, a work which was often considered to be shockingly realistic and radically secular in character. Roger Hinks expresses something of this work's power:

Caravaggio has turned his back not only on Mannerism, but also on the whole of the High Renaissance. He has gone back to the beginning. He has asked himself what these people really looked like in their bereavement. Something tremendous, incomprehensible, had come into their lives—and gone out of it again, with the breath that had gone out of the wonderful woman they had loved and lost. No wonder they look so utterly forlorn and helpless.⁸

Similarly, John Spike views the scene as a statement by Caravaggio that, however and whenever the sanctification of the Virgin and the Apostles took place, '... first of all, they were human':

[Caravaggio] was [here] standing on solid theological ground ... [he] was making the case for personal experience. The painting's representation of a deceased woman surrounded by mourners was truer, and more deserving of belief, in his opinion, than the supernatural panoply required by tradition.⁹

Indeed, while it might still be considered a fashionable thesis, it does not appear that Caravaggio was a kind of exemplar of the modern painter: populist, heretical and a rebel against authority. It appears to have been more the case that the artist's humble figures and plain naturalism were of a piece with the Counter-Reformation spirit of a 'low church', associated with some of the new

⁷ Council of Trent, *On Invocation, Veneration and Relics of the Saints, and on Sacred Images*, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Norman Tanner, Sheed and Ward 1990, 774-776.

⁸ Quoted in JOHN T. SPIKE, *Caravaggio*, Abbeville Press 2001, 152.

⁹ JOHN T. SPIKE, *Caravaggio*, Abbeville Press 2001, 155.

religious congregations such as the Oratorians, the Barnabites, and the Theatines. These awakened “a simplicity of faith and a mystic devotion which gave each individual a direct and earthly contact with God and His Mysteries”.¹⁰ Philip Neri, in particular, who emphasized the unaffectedness of the spiritual life in a way that encouraged ordinary people to experience their faith, must have made an unforgettable impression on the young Caravaggio.¹¹

Indeed, it is clear that Caravaggio reflected, in his canvases, his own needs and desires and spiritual crises to a surprising extent. He, who once averred “all my sins are mortal”, refused to idealise his figures. Already in 1603, Carel van Mander reports that Caravaggio insisted upon absolute fidelity to the individual model in seeking to depict the truth of particular experience. His work was famously antithetical to that of his contemporary, Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), who sought to depict a perfected ideal. To be sure, through his application of the principle of artistic selection, Carracci aimed at inspiring the viewer to virtue by seeking to represent more what ought to be, rather than what is, the case. Caravaggio would have nothing of such Platonic idealisation; his work strived to illustrate and illuminate, in a realist fashion, the human condition. One would have to insist that Caravaggio was certainly concerned with the truth of what he was depicting. His work is *not* characterised by the kind of ambiguous bitter-sweet melancholy present in depictions of classical myths. Rather, it typifies a full-blooded realism which invites the involvement of the viewer in a crucial historical moment. While beauty is certainly no guarantee of truth, Caravaggio is a clear exemplar of their interdependence. What is vital here is that, in his art, there is no attempt at all to distinguish form and content. Indeed they are manifestly interdependent in his work. I want to argue that such interdependence is practically inevitable in art.

To be sure, all art is a practical, not a speculative kind of activity. The artist engages in a very special kind of ‘making’. He or she transforms matter in such a radical way that it makes sense to aver that something wholly new and unique has come into being. What the artist seeks to accomplish is the emergence of a new kind of reality from the very matter he or she is working with. In this process, material properties, while necessary, are insufficient for the emergence of aesthetic properties. This newness and irreducibility has often led thinkers and artists to hold that art, properly speaking resides in the mind. Such theorists as Plato, members of the Florentine Academy, poets and authors of the Romantic Movement, and others, held that the viewer or listener is to recreate the original spark of creativity in his or her imagination, trying to recover something from the effects of this original artistic intuition in the artistic object or performance. Caravaggio for one, as should by now be clear, would have had nothing of this. For him, matter and form, like form and content, are indivisible. Indeed, works of art are made – from matter –

¹⁰ WALTER FRIEDLAENDER, *Caravaggio Studies*, Schocken Books, 1969, 123, quoted in THOMAS J. MCELLIGOTT, *Caravaggio and the Resurrection of the Body*, in *The Way*, 44 (2005) 24.

¹¹ See WALTER FRIEDLAENDER, *Caravaggio Studies*, Schocken Books, 1969, 126, quoted in THOMAS J. MCELLIGOTT, *Caravaggio and the Resurrection of the Body*, in *The Way*, 44 (2005) 24.

within a vital and cultural context: in a painting, what patches of colour or lines constitute depends on the forms they serve to realize; in turn what these forms compose depends on the wider context and on the expressive power of the work, and that is at least partly fixed by the understanding of the concept, the event, the emotion, or the intuition with which the artist and viewer are involved – an understanding that is manifested in the painting itself and in a sensitive and informed response to it.¹²

This, of course, means that there are internal relations between matter, form, content, meaning and truth. The relationship between the artist, audience and work of art is importantly different from the relationship between someone who writes a sentence she supposes to be false, her reader, and the sentence in print. It is interesting that, in the former, but not in the latter, case, “familiar charges ... include complaints of inauthenticity, of discernible lack of conviction, of confused conception, ... of interpretative superficiality, of mere illustration and so on ... [where, s]uch charges are based on looking at works themselves and discerning what is manifest in them”.¹³ Conversely, when looking at a sentence, one cannot tell whether the author believes it to be true, or even whether she understands it at all.

In the case of Caravaggio, it appears especially evident that his art stands as a presentation of the reality and values in which he and his art want to participate. His paintings are clearly not a mere effect of an artistic intuition but they embody that intuition in material form. He is not neutral with regards to the truth of his tableaux, not does he expect their viewers to remain neutral. In a vivid sense, in Caravaggio’s paintings, finding beautiful is, in a sense, finding credible and, to an extent, finding true.

At this point, one must consider, not only the light in the mind but also, the fire in the heart. For theology is not merely a speculative endeavour but also includes reflection on practical knowledge and morality. Of course, as signaled above, art too is ultimately a practical and not a speculative kind of knowledge. In this regard, it must be admitted that Caravaggio seems, at first glance, to be a very limpid example of the clear distinction between the production of artistic beauty and the fleshing out of personal goodness. However, it is ironically his refusal to idealise his figures on canvas that may indicate the way forward to recognise his profound moral and spiritual concerns.

It has been noted that Caravaggio lent a heightened sense of drama to the scenes he painted, charging them with an immense pathos. In this attempt, there is no doubt that Caravaggio’s use of light, at once convincing and theatrical, played a major part. Through his control of light Caravaggio illuminates, not only the event portrayed, but the entire human condition. Indeed, it was Caravaggio who cast ‘chiaroscuro’ in the role of main dramatic agent. However, light, in Caravaggio, is not irrelevant to the meaning of a picture; it must rather be granted an

¹² See JOHN HALDANE, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Religion*, Duckworth 2003, 169.

¹³ JOHN HALDANE, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Religion*, Duckworth 2003, 170.

iconographic interpretation. The artist often uses hard light hitting objects from outside and this appears always to signify strong or even violent emotion.¹⁴ This light is often contrasted by a soft light emanating from Christ – or from the saintly figure portrayed – which represents grace as unfolded in tenderness or compassion.¹⁵ Hence, in Caravaggio's work, light certainly serves as a signifier, tracing reality, and serving to create a dialogue of gazes between the figures thereby defining their relationship. Nevertheless, what is most significant is the light, born out of nowhere, which is sought out by the participants in the events portrayed. This light signifies a revelation of grace. Beyond the naturalism and the chiaroscuro technique, the resulting oeuvre is imbued with mysticism. This light of divine origin pins down reality, but also helps one to understand such reality. Caravaggio's oeuvre cannot simply be labelled realist: indeed, Walter Friedlaender calls much of his work 'realistic mysticism'.¹⁶ Ultimately, for Caravaggio, the mission was to reveal the hand of God. His work presents an encounter with God in the call and enchantment of God's absolute transcendence and beauty. In Caravaggio's pictorial encounters, the light of grace does far more than add a certain glow to the event; it suggests that the fire gratuitously granted to the heart becomes the very light in the mind.

In the end, one must also allude to the question that started off this reflection. Is it really the case that one could hope to build a theology around artistic beauty? Well, one must note that the arts have had an important role in focusing the minds of the faithful on the religious sphere. A further consideration, however, is that the experience of artistic beauty, as testifying to the possibility of *showing* where *saying* has run out of steam, suggests that human life in particular cannot be reduced to matter. The artistic endeavour is intimately linked with purpose, meaning and value. The artist always presents, in his or her work, a *Weltanschauung* which is at least partly concerned with an account of the deepest meaning of the human condition. Finally, it is highly significant that both works of art and verbal expressions (like dogmas or scriptural pericopes), which *embody* that which they depict or signify, are such an important arena in theology. Just as one would note the difference between saying, on the one hand, of someone, 'He behaves well' and, on the other hand, 'He made a great impression on me', it would be greatly reductive to claim that, for example, the greatness of a Baroque Church lies only in the correctness of its style, or that the theological significance of a dogma is only to be found in its precise formulation. What is in play, here, is a synthesis of content and mode of expression – which makes a great impression and invites one into a different way of awareness. One wants to say that the particular piece of architecture, or dogmatic formulation, is filled with its meaning. Naturally, such an experience, though objective, may not always *live* for the person. Nevertheless, both religious certainties and art embody their meaning so that it is irreducible and

¹⁴ See ALBRECHT WILKENS, *Light and Violence in Caravaggio: An Innovation in Sacred Representation and its Development*, in <http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/2001/32/indexe.html> [accessed on the 25th November 2007].

¹⁵ See ALBRECHT WILKENS, *Light and Violence in Caravaggio: An Innovation in Sacred Representation and its Development*, in <http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/2001/32/indexe.html> [accessed on the 25th November 2007].

¹⁶ Walter Friedlaender uses this phrase in his *Caravaggio Studies*, Schocken Books 1969, 123.

inexhaustible. Both religious dogmas or scriptural pericopes, and artistic objects manifest an absolute uniqueness and an inexhaustibility – *which means that* we may never completely understand them. Their uniqueness is reflected, respectively, in the materiality of the work of art and the precise formulation or expression of a belief; in both cases, the feeling is that the slightest alteration, or attempt to translate or describe them would somehow rupture their meaning. Their inexhaustibility means that one discovers ever-richer connections of meaning and significance within the life of those who experience them. In a certain sense, it might be said that these links ultimately encompass the whole of life: little seems irrelevant for our assessment of their value. The task of theology and of art criticism is an exploration of these connections. Such an investigation enables one to come both to a better understanding of their meaning and a greater appreciation of their unique irreducibility.¹⁷ This search manifests that the practice of art making and the aesthetic experience, and the whole arena of religious expression, are intimately related. In both realms, there is the attempt to transcend what can be said in order to evoke that which can only be shown – a quest which, as believers would claim, evokes God.

¹⁷ See MARK SULTANA, *The Possible Role of the Imagination in Philosophy and Theology*, in *Melita Theologica*, 57 (2006) 1, 12-14.